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LITERATURE AND VOCAL EXPRESSION

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At last the sky seems to be brightening, and the faithful teacher of vocal expression may discern "light between the trees"!

Instructors in the art of interpretative speech expression have stood in so parlous a position, for so long a time, that they have had to hold firmly to their ideals in order to keep even a spark of hope aglow. Now, at last, we seem likely to be recognized, not alone as ornamental, but as actually useful and necessary.

Rightfully the firmest ground on which interpretative work can ever stand, the broadest uses to which it can ever be put, aside from its stage dominion, must be in connection with the study and teaching of literature. This is not to slight in any way the various lines in which vocal expression may be usefully and culturally pursued. But our strongest *raison d'être* we have ourselves been slow to realize, and teachers of literature infinitely slower.

It has been my privilege to instruct in interpretative expression for fourteen years, eight in preparatory schools and the past six in university work. I trust I may be permitted, therefore, to speak from the teaching standpoint concerning standards in interpretative work, and the general attitude of by far the greater majority of English teachers toward teachers of vocal expression. What I may say is the result of observation in no one institution, but from experiences in various localities in Kentucky, New York, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Wisconsin.

That we have not made ourselves, long ere this, an absolute necessity in the teaching of literature is, I believe, largely our own fault. I have already indicated one reason why vocal expression has been slow to gain friends among teachers of literature, viz., standards in our own work. Let us face the matter frankly. Too often do we find teachers of expression whose interests, sometimes from choice, sometimes from necessity, are chiefly concerned with the preparing of students for recital only, such preparation consisting largely of a coaching process with little or no effort to arouse original thought or feeling, or to emphasize in the student definite thought processes. Beyond this, and of paramount importance, the voice, except in its needs for that special recitation, is given absolutely no attention, and the student no idea at all of vocalization in general. Because of this many people are still under the impression that work in vocal expression is largely a coaching and imitative process. Nothing could be farther from the aim of any true work in the art.

Again, we use and permit the use of material for interpretation that is largely useless and hopeless. It has little literary value and no really human appeal. How long will it yet be before we of this profession shall definitely insist upon the use of a higher grade of material for public reading? There will always be a public, and the kind of public we want, for readings of *some* literary value. We have no right to complain if that same desirable public refuses to take notice, even, of so-called recitals and reciters—or performers. If there must be performers, let them use the vaudeville stage where they, too, may find a proper audience, one that expects costumes and lights, accessories and performance, but not necessarily thought.

Another grievous weakness we have: we do not, as a body of teachers and interpretative artists, include enough people of broad culture and thorough education. We have seen too many of mediocre scholarship and little personality leave their preparatory work, often only high-school graduates, often after one or two years in a college or university, and with this preparation(?) enter a special school of expression, considering themselves fitted after two short years in such a school to teach one of the most far-reaching

of subjects. We are greatly handicapped in this regard, in that these special training schools have no real standard of entrance requirements. If there were one school, even, which would insist upon a four-year college or university course, with probably a degree, as entrance requirement, how soon the effects would be felt in our entire body of teachers and readers! So far as I know there is no such school. It would of necessity have to be an endowed institution, not obliged to exist on tuition received. "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished" but, alas, it seems at present utterly utopian. There is much opportunity, however, for those of us who have influence to exert it always as we ought by insisting on a completed course in college or university. And since so very much depends on personal qualifications for a teacher of this subject (does it not for any subject?), we should not encourage those who, though they may have a certain amount of dramatic instinct, still are not adapted in personality or mentality to the teaching of vocal expression and interpretative art.

One other factor enters into our list of failings: we still lack personal sincerity and a business-like attitude toward our work, especially in the arrangement of our courses. The study of vocal expression should remove insincerities and develop mind, voice, and body, until the three, acting together in simple, direct sincerity, make it possible to carry conviction and persuasion in ourselves, as well as to reveal the thoughts and emotions intrusted to us on the written page by all the bards and sages. Such simplicity and sincerity, together with a clearer and more coherent idea in our arrangement of work, could not but add to our dignity and importance as teachers of vocal expression.

I have admitted our weaknesses. We have them, as who has not? But even these admissions do not, to my mind, explain the attitude that teachers of literature have, until recently, exhibited toward us. As I intimated at the first, there seems now to be a more general feeling that we may not only be helpful, but possibly really necessary to the teaching of English and literature. I have been deeply interested during the past year in the articles in the *English Journal*, coming from men and women in authoritative positions, teachers of English and literature, all suggesting a definite

need for more vitalizing of the literature taught. These articles have called attention to a lack of voice, personality, and warm sympathy on the part of the teacher of literature. The articles have asked for more expression through the medium of the human voice; and for a somewhat warmer and more human—dare I say a somewhat more emotional or imaginative?—interpretation and presentation by the instructor.

Whatever else the study of literature should include, it would seem there could be no doubt as to the necessity of its carrying to the student's *heart*, as well as mind, its great human thought and feeling, and, if poetry, its beauty of musical expression as well. So utterly deaf are our ears in these days to music in the speaking voice, and this one great opportunity to reach the young is so slighted! How many a testimony I could give from students, who, with kindling eyes, have told me they never grasped the significance of that poem of Browning, of Wordsworth, of Shelley, until now, when, in the attempt to convey to others its meaning, that meaning has suddenly flashed clear, and they feel themselves in touch with the mind and heart—yes, and art—of the author about whom they have studied many facts—as they should—but whom they never *knew* till now!

Good reading, expressive reading, that is, does indeed seem a lost art. It is never required of the student, the teacher does not attempt it himself. To quote a recent article in the *English Journal*, which, coming as it did from a member of an education faculty, gave me a distinct thrill of hope, "not one teacher in a hundred reads well, or attempts to read well." He has stated a small percentage, surely, but it is my observation and belief that it is not too small. It has been my privilege to work with many thoughtful English students, majors in the subject and post-graduates taking masters' degrees. I have been repeatedly amazed to find that this is their first consideration of the vocal problem, their first attempt in all their course to carry to others, not only their knowledge of all that concerns the work in hand, but also the emotional content or life-lesson. Need I say these students, too, have been amazed at their inadequacy, that they have repeatedly said, "If I had only known sooner, but I didn't think anything

about it." I will not multiply instances, but they are many. Possibly three out of ten students majoring or minoring in English think for themselves of the necessity for a consideration of voice and interpretation. To a far smaller proportion is it even suggested or advised by the teachers of English. If this latter body will but co-operate more cordially with us, we shall soon be able to have teachers of literature who will not be open to the criticisms which are now as justly theirs as are any I have herein applied to teachers of vocal expression.

It has been my personal observation that far from helping us to be helpful, an English faculty, save in a few instances, hinders us by utter ignorance of what classes in vocal expression are attempting to do, and by actually advising students against the work (admitting, though, remember, that they "really don't know much about the courses," but "you don't want to waste your time; you can talk all right anyway!"). Had the majority of teachers of vocal expression no weaknesses, they could not hope to make much progress with students in English under such conditions. And I insist that such conditions are far more general than isolated or exceptional. I have always made it a practice to visit occasionally the classes in literature, that I might keep in touch with the material there under consideration and so be helpful to the students in interpretation. I have yet to see a member of an English faculty in a class in vocal expression or interpretation for a similar or any other reason.

Personally, I have followed the articles in the *English Journal* concerning the matter of the old and the new in the teaching of literature with eager hopefulness. It is because there *is* a new spirit that I write this article. I urge that the body of teachers of vocal expression shall have a stronger sense of its responsibilities and possibilities, that it insist on scholarly standards in its members, its material, its courses. Lastly I plead for a more thoughtful consideration from the teachers of English with whom we are asked to co-operate. We can be helpful, we desire to be; we have made much improvement in all our short-comings, and we shall make more, in proportion as there is more active co-operation from the body of English teachers.